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Intelligent intelligence

ONE OF THE Carter administration's major blunders in the intelligence field was the decision to grant the CIA a virtual monopoly on the collection, flow, analysis and distribution of intelligence information.

In effect, this decision gave Mr. Carter's CIA director, Adm. Stansfield Turner, absolute control over what intelligence data and estimates went to the president and the National Security Council.

Thus, the entire intelligence community spoke with one voice. Dissenting views or countervailing information from the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency or the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research never reached the White House. If Turner's judgments were in error, and several of them most certainly were, there was no system of checks and balances to protect the president and his top advisers from acting on flawed intelligence estimates.

Fortunately, the Reagan transition team is reliably reported to be

recommending a return to the kind of multi-agency intelligence effort favored by the Pentagon, the State Department, and more than a few officials in the CIA itself.

THIS DIVERSIFIED approach no doubt offends those, like Turner, who imagine that the inexact science of intelligence-gathering and analysis can be refined and enhanced by imposing rigid centralization. The seasoned CIA veterans that Turner ignored or cashiered could have told him that diversity may be messy at times, but it is also essential if national policy is to be formulated on the best available intelligence assessments.

The fact that the Carter administration spurned this cardinal principle in processing intelligence upon which its own foreign policy decisions were based is one reason a new administration will have a chance to do better beginning Jan. 20.